The Lure

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The Lure

by claritylore

Summary

After escaping from custody, Will asks Hannibal to take him to Minnesota to see where Abigail Hobbs died. When they get there, Will realises that his friend was the copycat killer all along... but will he fight, or will he finally embrace the darkness that Hannibal has been cultivating in him for so long?

AU NOTES: Everything in Season 1 is as in the show, right up until Will points that gun at Hannibal in the final episode.

Notes

"The eye altering, alters all."
— William Blake

Chapter 1

"It's as if Abigail was supposed to die in this kitchen."

Will looked at the blood on the floor, the spray on the cabinets, and saw it all as an ocean. His vision was swimming, his brain cooking in his skull. The smell of copper and death was still floating around in the air. It almost made him gag.

He automatically described his impression of the crime scene; the patterns in the red, the arterial spray. Whatever everybody thought he was now, he knew he was not a killer. Will was a profiler, no more than that. Performing the ritual of profiling the scene felt important in the circumstances; grounding.

Yet he knew Dr Lecter still looked at him as something quite different and horrible. He thought he was guilty.

"If you were in Garret Jacob Hobbs' frame of mind when you killed her, they may never find her," his psychiatrist reminded him, gently.

"Cause I honored every part of her?" Will blinked away the flies behind his eyes that had kept forming the shape of Hobbs in his subconscious ever since he'd connected to him to find him.

"Perhaps you didn't come here looking for a killer. Perhaps you came here to find yourself." Dr Lecter stepped closer to him, head tilted a little, as if he was making an effort to understand him. If he was intimidated by the prospect of being alone at the scene of a crime with a man everyone called a murderer and a cannibal, it didn't register in his face or posture.

No, that wasn't right. Will knew that he wasn't acting. He really wasn't concerned. Something was right on the precipice of his mind, trying to leap off into the air. It was tilting, nearly there. There was something...

"At a time when other men fear their isolation, yours has become understandable to you."

His thoughts tumbled off the cliff edge and began to plummet.

"You are alone because you are unique."

And in an instant, with the thud of a painful landing, it all hit him. He wasn't in the mind of Garrett Jacob Hobbs anymore, he was in the mind of his copycat. That person who had so expertly framed him... he had been there all along, living inside his brain, infecting it and swelling it.

It was Dr Lecter, and Will immediately felt like a black bag had been thrown over his head and he was now languishing in the dungeons of his own psychiatrist's twisted mind.

"I'm as alone as you are," Will said, vision sinking into a pit of black and white and red. The words seemed to pour out only because he was living inside the other man's mind now; Will

hardly felt they had passed his own lips. He was captor bonding from the dungeon, finding Hannibal's motives and absorbing it.

He looked to his doctor, his so trusted friend. The devil stared back at him, smiling. A beautiful devil, with ruby eyes and something soothing and inviting suffused into his aura. "If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you would have become someone other than yourself."

Will wanted to protest, scream that he knew who he was, and he was not a killer, but the words got caught in his throat. He was falling into those dark eyes, not sure where he started and Dr Lecter ended. The pendulum he normally summoned had been replaced with nothing more than a flash of inspiration, a black dot on a black sea, taking him entirely off guard and giving him no warning about going into his hyper-empathetic state of mind. He had reconstructed the mind of a killer without even being aware of it, and that mind was embedded into him far deeper than he'd ever known before.

He slowly raised his gun and aimed it towards Hannibal, a last effort to fight back, though he half felt it would have been a better idea just to aim it at himself.

"Are you a killer, Will?" Dr Lecter asked, his face poised, only a slight note of energy akin to anticipation animating it in some small fashion. "You. Right now. This man standing in front of me. Is this who you really are?"

If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you would have become someone other than yourself, those words echoed again through the cavern of Will's mind. *Inspirations? Become someone else?*

He felt as though he should be hearing the whistle of a kettle, so heated and frothy were his insides now, everything flying around, unstable. The man before him seemed dark and malicious, a monster in the clothes of a man... and Will was lost. He was a monster too; the imperfect mirror reflection of one that dearly desired to love his own image, like a hellish Narcissus.

"You said it felt good to kill Garret Jacob Hobbs," the doctor continued, still reaching out to lightly scratch at his heart with jagged claws. "Would it feel good to kill me now?"

Will swallowed hard. "Garret Jacob Hobbs was a murderer. Are you a murderer, Dr Lecter?" He knew the answer but he had to say it. He rubbed his forehead, catching some of the sweat pooling in his dark curls. "It was you all along. You're in my head."

"Will..."

"I'm as alone as you are," he repeated at a whisper, breaking down, his vision further depleted by the dots of salty water bursting out of his eye sockets like lava.

In the periphery of his vision, the figure of a man loomed in shadows which came together to form Jack Crawford. The man hung back, immediately recognising the imminent danger of a shaking, tearful Will Graham with a gun in his hands.

"Why? Why me...?" Will muttered, ignoring Jack's entrance. He wasn't seeking any sort of answer, or even asking a question really. He was sounding out quiet prayers to an empty universe; the same universe that had thrown a lonely psychopath into the path of a lonely sympathiser of psychopaths and demanded that they fight or subsume one another.

All the while, Dr Lecter was watching him with inscrutable grace.

"You wanted... s-someone like me..." Will gasped, wracked with powerful sobs, the last part of the man he recognised as Will Graham fighting the pull, the gaping maw of horror that was closing around him. "Someone who... thinks how I think."

"Easy Will," Jack Crawford interjected with a tone of authority, one hand in the air with his flat palm held to sooth, the other on his gun, prepared for rejection.

"And I'm... I'm..."

"Will?" the doctor asked, almost reverently, as if he was holding his breath.

"I'm you..." he sobbed.

Will took his shot. In the same moment, he was blown back against the sideboard and slid into the corner where Garrett Jacob Hobbs had slumped and died. His shoulder exploded into shards of blood and bone.

He saw Doctor Lecter standing over him with a look of sheer delight. It was the most open expression he'd ever seen in the man.

"See... see..." he gasped.

"Yes. I do see."

Lecter look back over his shoulder to the body of Jack Crawford, brains sliding out of a messy hole in his temple and making a mess of the linoleum. His vacant eyes were frozen open with shock.

"Sleep, Will," Lecter said, calmly. "Don't fight it. I will take care of everything."

Will did as he was told, as if responding to the commands of his own tired brain to take rest.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke to the bright white light and half opened shutters of a familiar place. He was in the hospital again.

The initial blurriness of his vision came together and focused on the figure sitting beside him in a chair. It started and leaned closer to him.

"Hey there."

"Alana," Will muttered, recognition returning slowly. His throat felt scratchy and hoarse.

"How are you?" she asked, but her smile was tinged with sadness.

"Um. Sore?" Will looked down and saw a large white gauze taped to his shoulder and tubes stuck into the veins of his hand, topped by a grey pulse monitor snapped onto his finger.

"You've been through..." she stopped and choked, and Will realised that she was starting to cry. Alana covered it was a cough and swallowed it down, fighting to stay strong. "I'm sorry."

Will frowned, not entirely sure how to react. He didn't really feel much at all, just a slight note of confusion.

That was when he realised; there was no guard on his door and he wasn't attached to the bed with handcuffs. He wasn't a prisoner.

"Is um... is Jack okay?" It was hard for him to ask, but he had to know. Will knew he'd shot at him but he wasn't sure why at that moment, or whether he'd hit the mark.

Alana took a moment to compose herself. "I'm so sorry I didn't see it, Will. You said you were innocent and I..." Another wave of tears threatened to choke her but Alana was strong enough to fend it back once again. "I can't believe... it was him all along."

Will stared at her, uncomprehending.

She put a hand over his and curled it around, trying to offer comfort, perhaps just as much for herself as for him. "Hannibal told us what happened... You pieced it all together in the end and Jack tried to kill you."

He wanted to say something to the contrary, yet also didn't want to at the same time. The reactions he was having, they weren't his own. Will wasn't able to speak in his own voice anymore. He was stuck in the mindset of someone else now.

"How long have I been here?" he wondered out loud.

"A few days. I um, I guess I should bring you up to speed." Alana smiled again, wan and tense. "They found Abigail Hobb's body in Jack's freezer. And parts of Cassie Boyle's lungs. He uh... they think he killed his wife too before he went after you and Hannibal. You're lucky to be alive, Will."

Will let his eyes slide closed as he tried to centre himself. He reached out and grasped onto his first reaction, realising too late that it was the cold and impassive feelings of the monster that had prised him open and jumped into the open space.

"Where's Dr Lecter?"

"Probably still giving statements. He is pretty down... blames himself for not reporting what Bella told him in their sessions. Sounds like she was starting to suspect Jack was losing his mind. She was afraid of him."

"Why..." Will began, and cleared his throat, looking down to the white sheets to avoid looking her in the eyes, "why would he frame me?"

"I'm not sure that's what he was trying to do. He was obsessed with the Ripper. Maybe he was motivating you to find him... all that stuff with Miriam Lass, his wife's cancer. He just snapped. Maybe we'll never really know." She wiped an escaping tear away from her cheek. "Will, they did a lot of scans and the right hemisphere of your brain was inflamed. They are treating you with antiviral and steroid therapies. All the hallucinations, the spatial dysphoria, it was all an infection. A rare form of encephalitis."

"Then I'm not insane?" Will asked, privately reveling in bitter irony at the thought. If he hadn't been insane before, he had to be now. He had murdered his boss and he didn't even care. He was stuck in the dark mind of a killer and he couldn't push him out and speak for himself anymore.

"No," Alana said with a sympathetic laugh. "No. You're not insane." Her thumb stroked the back of his hand and he stared at her intently.

This was what he had wanted. To be proven innocent, to have Alana see him as something other than Jack Crawford's broken pony, unstable and to be pitied. He wanted her to see him as a man, someone she could love and be with. Or at least, he knew he had. Now all he felt was emptiness at the sight of her. She looked... unimportant. Plain even. Her outpouring of emotions in his direction seemed oddly repulsive, coming, as they had, too late to save him.

"So are they certain Jack was the copycat killer?"

"They found other evidence in his house too. There was a feeding tube with your DNA on it. You've been having a lot of seizures so they're guessing he got you to, um, eat that ear during an episode. Also... you should know, there's an investigation going on in relation to Dr Sutcliffe. It's looking like Jack paid him off to fake your scan results before he... he killed him."

The way everything was falling into place made him want to laugh. How easily Hannibal could manipulate everything to his liking, it made him feel... almost proud. Powerful. "Jack

wanted me to keep thinking the way I did... to catch the Ripper."

Alana nodded, gazing at him sympathetically.

Will felt a tug in his chest but it wasn't for her. He felt like a tiny piece of a very intricate jigsaw puzzle, lost in an elaborate design beyond anything he'd experienced before. But instead of feeling repulsed, he just felt awed.

"I'm tired" he mumbled, eyes starting to slide closed again, fighting the urge to go back to sleep.

"Of course. You rest. I'll be here."

He tried to smile in response and found his muscles wouldn't respond.

Will would remember seeing Dr Lecter standing in the doorway, dark and looming, like an omen of death, watching him as his eyes slid shut, though he would never know if he had actually been there or not.

Chapter End Notes

NOTE: Well, it's already been shown that Hannibal can get into Jack's home at will, and without leaving a trace, back in Episode 5. So no reason he couldn't again...

Chapter 3

After a period of rest and recovery at the hospital, Will had a lot of questions to answer. The FBI were trying to contain the situation in the media and only Freddie Lounds at tattlecrime.com was still reporting on the allegations against the former Head of Behavioural Sciences with any sort of detail.

How she was obtaining her information, Will didn't care to know. But it helped him to fill in a few spaces in his knowledge for when he had to make statements. He could easily blame his encephalitis for any other gaps and the interviewers and lawyers couldn't prove much either way.

Dr Lecter stayed away from him for the whole time. Others might have taken it as a lack of caring about him now, but Will knew it was actually a sign of trust. He knew that Will wasn't about to betray the truth to the authorities; partly because he knew just how easily the doctor would be able to turn things around on him again, and partly because Will had already made a very clear choice in deciding to shoot Jack Crawford instead of him.

It made Will twitchy to be living halfway inside the skin of someone who seemed almost imaginary to him now. He didn't say much to anyone, even Alana, anymore. He just focused on breathing and existing.

Anything else might have led to the return of his old self, with all the feelings and emotions, the devastating guilt and the raw fear. To go back to being Will Graham was simply not an option he could contemplate. So instead he lay coiled, inverted, sleeping awake until the time he would be disturbed again by the killer embedded behind his eyes.

It was better than dreaming of Abigail and her father, or Jack and his wife, or Georgia Madgen, or any one of the people who had suffered and died in the impact radius surrounding himself and one Hannibal Lecter.

Alana offered to let him stay at her place for a while, where his dogs were chewing up her carpets, and Will almost agreed. Except that he knew, right in his bones, that accepting her offer would mean her destruction. Maybe not straight away, but soon enough.

Instead he asked for some space. It hurt her, believing he couldn't forgive her for not believing him, but it was better that way.

Will asked her to care for his dogs a little longer while he recovered his health and that was the closest he could come to returning her affections and need for friendship. He returned to Wolf Trap alone, to the eerie silence of a place that didn't feel like it was his.

A single letter was in his mailbox and he knew exactly who it was from.

Dear Will,

Please visit me when you are feeling recovered.

Bring a fish or two for supper - I would like to dine on something caught by your hands and have just the recipe for the occasion.

Regards,
Dr Hannibal Lecter

Something was taped to the back of the letter. Will pulled it free and examined it.

It was a lure, just like the ones Dr Lecter had used to frame him. This one was dark in colour, expertly wrapped and prepared, with black hair used in the binding and as part of the decoration.

Will knew exactly where the hair had come from.

This was another sign of trust. If he wanted, he could take it to the FBI, get it tested and maybe even exonerate Jack Crawford. But both of them knew he wouldn't. They had come too far for that.

Will carried out his instructions to the letter. He spent the next day fishing and wrapped up a selection of his catches in newspaper, ready for transportation. After a thorough shower, he sat and stared at the fish packages for a little while, not nervous exactly but sensing that his life was about to change forever.

Lecter greeted him at the door to his home with a silent smile and a slight bow of his head. Nothing needed to be said as Will walked over the threshold, into his world once more, taking notice of the door being locked behind him top and bottom, as if he was not expected to leave for the evening.

"Did you bring supper?" his host asked as he led Will into his kitchen.

Will nodded and handed his bundle over. The way Lecter purposefully brushed his fingers over his as he accepted the package did not go unnoticed.

"Thank you," he said and began the process of unwrapping them onto his gleaming kitchen counter and glass framed cutting board. "Please, make yourself at home."

Awkwardly, Will removed his jacket and hung it up in the hallway. He felt strangely naked as he returned to kitchen, where Hannibal was merrily unwrapping the five or so parcels to choose from for their impending meal. Although he knew that his body language would be dissected by the resident psychiatrist before him, he couldn't help but keep his arms folded across his chest defensively.

After a long pause, he couldn't hold it in anymore. "You killed Abigail."

Lecter grew momentarily still. "Yes," he said, and then continued to prepare his work station to begin their meal. "I regret that it had to happen. You have no idea how much."

"You killed Jack's wife," Will continued.

"An unfortunate necessity to ensure your exoneration." Lecter looked to him, his maroon eyes sparkling under the light. "You killed Jack Crawford."

That made Will curl in on himself even more. He looked down at his feet for so long, he didn't noticed the predator approaching him until his arms were descending, leviathon-like, around him,

"I knew it was in you."

Will stiffened straight, not knowing what to do. The sudden effort at contact between them was very new. He'd seen Hannibal act this way towards Abigail, but they'd always kept a more professional, more male, distance. He knew what the motivation for it was all too well; Hannibal wanted no more barriers between them, on any level. Will wasn't sure if he was ready for that and he couldn't make himself relax.

Then, before he knew what was happening, Will found himself being led out of the kitchen by the hand, the preparations for their feast abandoned. He didn't protest, though he couldn't help but tug back a little when the doctor unlocked a door which opened to a flight of steps down into darkness.

"Where are we going?"

"I want to show you something."

That was all the explanation he was going to get, he knew. So he made no further protest as Hannibal led him down, into the darkness, around a corner, and through a second locked door.

A dim light was flicked on. "No more secrets," Hannibal said, and held back, pushing Will forward.

He saw a metal table under the light, of the sort normally found in a morgue, with taps and drainage holes at one end. Beyond that were three large freezers, braced against the wall, and a variety of chains and hooks, meat cleavers and knives set onto a panel above a workstation in the corner, with a large industrial sink to one side. Another wall was covered in newspaper clippings and print outs from tattlecrime.com, with headlines proclaiming 'Chesapeake Ripper Strikes Again!' and variations thereof.

Will quietly slid to his knees.

Hannibal crouched down beside him, placing a hand in the small of his back, following his gaze around the room.

"There never was a copycat," Will groaned in his chest. "You're.. *him*."

Pride reverberated between them and the doctor smiled, radiating with a rarely seen genuineness. "And you're me." He cupped Will's cheek, gently, eyes warm and calm. "And everything I did in the name of the copycat was for you. To help you make the connections you needed to progress."

As his glasses were pulled away from his face, Will pressed his eyes closed rather than allow that final intrusion of contact. "Why? Why me?" he groaned, echoing the question he had asked while standing on the stain where Abigail had died.

"Will, look at me."

He frowned and tensed, fighting not to obey the command. "No."

"Will." Lecter's voice was more authoritative and demanding now.

Slowly, he allowed his gaze to connect with the darkness at the core of Hannibal's eyes, causing an instant jolt of lightening through his nervous system.

Then Dr Lecter was leaning in closer, tilting his head, and Will was panicking and shutting down.

Chapter 4

Just as Will thought he would actually drown in his own breathless coil, Lecter drew away from him, letting him free. The man raised to his full height and stood by the door, looking oddly regal in the dim light. He slipped his hands into his pockets and remained perfectly still, head bowed in an oddly submissive way. He looked almost *chastised* by the reaction.

Will cast a quick glance in his direction and wondered for a moment if he had imagined what had just happened; that tilt of the head, the warmth of his hand on his back, the glint in his eye. It was all too easy to believe otherwise now that the moment had passed.

He tried to summon some sense of composure, but was actually dismayed when it came to him easily, through the conduit of Dr Lecter's imprint on him. In a flash, he realised why he had always felt so at ease in the man's presence: he was capable of completely disconnecting from every part of his emotions and his humanity at will, which was like a soothing balm to a man suffering from an empathy disorder. He had been like the eye of the storm to Will. Hannibal was his sanctuary from the endless eruptions of other peoples' emotions, which battered him wherever he went.

"Please, take your time and look around this room, Will. I believe... it will be beneficial to you," Lecter said, betraying a slight note of apprehension with an unscheduled pause amid his speech. "I will prepare our meal." He returned Will's glasses to him and walked away.

He was left alone in the basement and remained frozen for some time at the contemplation that he was in the *dungeon* lair of the Chesapeake Ripper. He had been chasing the shadow of his own doctor, his friend, someone he had truly trusted and relied on. For all that he knew that Hannibal was a monster, he found it hard to accept the full extent of his madness could extend to this level of meticulous organisation. It was both horrifying and frighteningly impressive.

He pondered the sense he had that Hannibal wasn't entirely shut down. There were feelings there, Will could tell. He had seen something in that moment between them, though he couldn't yet entirely decipher it. Beneath the calm facade, Will already knew intrinsically that what Hannibal had told him he felt for Abigail, that sense of obligation and need to care for her, was entirely real. And that didn't in any way conflict with the fact that he had killed her in the end. Will actually understood the thought processes that could make those two seemingly disparate realities combine into a logical position, he was so deeply lost inside Hannibal's head.

As he slowly drew to his feet, he focused on the certain knowledge he had that he was held in same regard as Abigail Hobbs had been. It was clear there was something there, a fondness - *or maybe more*, Will thought but immediately pushed it away - that placed him on a pedestal in Hannibal's eyes. But if he did not prove himself worthy of this trust, he would die for it. Just as he would have been sent to jail, framed for a series of murders of his doctor's devising, if he hadn't let himself take that final plunge into the man's mind and submitted to him in that terrible moment when he shot Jack Crawford dead.

Will had no doubt that he was the first person to have seen inside this inner sanctum of Hannibal Lecter's creation, or at least the first to have seen it without dying for the privilege. He listened hard, wondering if Hannibal was lurking on the stairs, and only stepped forward when he was absolutely certain he was alone.

What he saw in that room haunted him throughout the meal they shared, so much so that he said barely a word through the entire thing. In his mind's eye, he was running his hand over the cold metal of that dissection table, seeing blood swirling around on it, gleaming in the light, like the beautiful painting of an old master. He was lost in the unexpected feeling of appreciation he had felt... the sense of absurd wonder at his own innate power. As he chewed the crisped skin of the fish he had caught for Hannibal to cook, he thought about all of the plastic wrapped limbs stashed in his freezers. The blood packs. The heads in jars. Miriam Lass' head in a jar.

It only hit him as he finished his meal and stared at the remnants of his fish, with its staring eye. *Hannibal Lecter is a cannibal.*

He took this new piece of knowledge in with a dumb muted grace, knowing that his subconscious had been trying to tell him that the Ripper was eating parts of his victims for some time. *"His mutilations hide the true nature of his crimes,"* he had once told the BSU team, but he hadn't made that final connection before. Perhaps it was because he had been so far into the head of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, seeing through the prism of his cannibalistic thirst for flesh, he hadn't been able to push that perception out further to see what the Ripper was really doing.

With a brutal certainty, he knew that he too had eaten human flesh. Dr Lecter had been feeding him for months, at every opportunity, forcing the fruits of his crimes down his throat, quite literally. He was one of *them* already... had been even before he'd pulled the trigger on Crawford.

When he looked up at Hannibal, it was with new eyes. Even though the encephalitis was gone and his hallucinations were contained, that strange stag creature he had perceived him as in Abigail's home was there more than ever, lurking just underneath the skin.

Will waited for his gag reflex to engage and felt numb when it didn't. "You eat them," he said, dumbly, as if coming into the middle of a conversation that had only been had in his subconscious.

"I thought it appropriate to cook something that *you* had caught on this occasion, to ensure your enjoyment. Post revelation, so to speak," Hannibal said, and held up his carafe. "More wine?"

Will found himself accepting the offering without question, watching it slosh into his glass like blood, drinking it on command. Letting it flow over his tongue and down his throat was taken, he knew, as acceptance of his newfound knowledge.

Lecter's smiled grew wide and pleased, like that of a sated panther, full with meat and left longing for nothing, save to have its belly scratched. "There are few things so pleasing as

sharing a fine meal and even finer wine," he said, amicably, and then added, "with one's finest friend."

The slight intimation of something unsaid that lived behind his words didn't escape Will's forensic abilities. Intentional or not, Dr Lecter was allowing him to see a level of vulnerability that had never been apparent before. Will even noticed a slight twitch in Dr Lecter's hand, and guessed that he had wanted to move it across and rest it over where his own lay, flat on the table, though he had thought better of it.

Silence descended on them once again and remained for most of the evening. But when Will finally moved to leave, he lingered in the threshold of the doorway, making their farewells take longer than necessary, curiosity overtaking him. Yet Lecter made no move towards him, save to hand his coat over. There was no further brush of hands, or welcome-unwelcome contact, leaving Will feeling hollowed out and a little confused as he walked to his car.

For all that he knew he was lost to Dr Lecter, complicit in his crimes and unable to help but empathise with him, there was still something he couldn't quite grasp about Hannibal's intentions. It was a blind spot that itched.

Will stopped to get gas on the way home at a small roadside station. He was still lost in his thoughts when he inadvertently cut into the line to pay.

"Hey, watch it you little shit," the young guy in sunglasses who was behind him growled, and then hissed, "fucking asshole," when Will awkwardly acknowledged his error. "Yeah, get to the goddamned back of the line," the man continued, unnecessarily, before hassling the shop assistant for not selling his desired brand of gum.

After paying, Will stared at the man from his car, over the top rim of his glasses. The bully was sat in his truck, throwing peanuts into his mouth and tapping on his phone. *"Pig,"* he heard Hannibal's voice in his mind. Will imagined him bleeding by the roadside, his guts hanging out of his belly, his face frozen in shock and fear. How easy it would be, he thought, to follow him and kill him.

Dr Lecter would certainly find that catch of interest at their next meal together, he thought with a private chuckle.

Fortunately, before the psychosis really took hold of him, the man in the truck drove off. Will didn't manage to move his car in time to actually pursue him, but it startled him how close he had come to going through with it.

He really was on the edge of something terrible and there was no one left to help him. No Abigail, no Alana, no Jack, no FBI team.

No Will Graham either. Just Hannibal Lecter. There was nothing left of him but the will and the want of a murderer.

Chapter 5

The garden of entangled trees and plants that Will found himself within that night was very dark. A lot of ghosts were wandering there. He too was wandering, but he was too afraid to reach out to any of them, not even Abigail or Georgia, and especially not Jack.

The black stag who had been following him for so long was there too, but instead of fearing it, Will was now actively searching for it. He could hear its hooves and snorts of breath through its nostrils as it ran around the forest. It was a minotaur, a demon, a man and a beast, all at once. Instead of running from it, or hunting it, he knew that he needed to finally understand it.

When he found the creature at last, it wasn't any of those things anymore. It had Hannibal's face and form, but with red eyes and dark feathers running like tendrils out of its limbs, like a black swan in half human form. As he approached, it went into a flurry and seemed to be everywhere at once, spinning around him, feathers flying in a haze.

He saw his own limbs shedding feathers too. They started off as white but soon turned grey. Those too were shed in the storm the two of them created in seeking each other out.

All at once they collided and stood face to face, Hannibal was no longer anything other than himself, and nor was Will. They stood before one another, naked and still. Two men, and nothing more.

"What do you want?" Will asked, in that dreamlike way where no words are spoken but they are heard nevertheless.

Hannibal smiled, in that way he did when honest amusement touched him; that look reserved for Will alone, now perfectly replicated in his dreams.

"What you want," he replied and appeared to be even closer.

"What do I want?"

And again, Hannibal was even closer, so that all Will could see was him. "What I want."

The word 'want' echoed through the world he had created. Everything was repeating it, the trees and the sky and the ground, all whispering it, trying to decipher its meaning and implications on his behalf.

"Want," Will said, and opened his arms to Hannibal.

That seemed to be what the man was waiting for. They kissed in the way that dreamers do in their own minds, with passion and beauty. Hannibal was soft and pliant in his arms, though no less diminished as an avatar of primal strength. In taking him as his own in this way, Will felt powerful too. He felt stable and content.

Everything that was happening was because Will wanted it and he knew he held the control now. No more would the black stag with raven feathers stalk him at a distance. He had deigned to draw it close and now it had no means of escape. The creature was drawn to him because it was part of him already.

The bed of feathers they had made grew large enough to form a pillow for them to fall to amidst the ominous and twisted trees of the forest Will had dreamed into being. He was overwhelmed with the desire to pull Hannibal closer and closer, to subsume him into his very being even. He gave him a new name, something that he knew to be true intrinsically in his own private self. *Want*, he called him, because that was expressive the form he took within Will's mind. He wanted. Hannibal was that want.

Will drove himself into Hannibal's body and drew his legs about his hips, the act a proclamation of new understanding about what they were to each other. It felt simple but raw. There was no time to wonder whether it was his own want he was feeling, or if he was reflecting the want of the monster that had claimed him mind and soul. It didn't seem important.

He realised that he was the creature of dark form and black feathers now, his form more lithe and sharp claws growing from his fingertips.

Will sank into the want more and more, drawing cries of joy all around them while he clawed at Hannibal's flesh and his own in turn. The closer they became, the more wild his thrusts, the more the pleasure grew, and Will was sinking through the holes he'd clawed into the man's skin. Then he fell through to the bone, and right to the centre of him, until a final explosion of bliss erupted and they were one.

He woke up gasping for breath. The night sweats that had plagued him were long gone now that his brain was no longer cooking in his skull, but he quickly realised that he hadn't escaped the ruination of his clothes entirely. The insides of his boxers were wet and sticky, his stomach tingling with the aftershocks of a powerful orgasm.

"Shit," he groaned, not entirely sure how to take it. He hadn't woken up in that state since the ninth grade.

As unsettling as it was, he knew he had to analyse his dreams. There was no running away from them now. So Will only made a slight effort to clean himself up, removing the stained shorts and using some tissues from his nightstand drawer to dry off, before lying back in bed and staring at the ceiling for a while.

The first inescapable truth he had to remind himself of was that Hannibal Lecter was a murderer, many times over. A genuine monster, of the kind he had spent his life training himself to try and catch, to imprison. This was something Will had to constantly reinforce in his mind these days.

Just as he had made lures to catch his meals through fishing, so he had snagged a lot of those particular fish - serial murderers - using the hooks of his uniquely structured mind. He had consumed the thoughts and deeds of those murderers and made them a part of him.

It was fitting, symbolic even, that Hannibal had snared him with his own lures, both physical and mental. He was the biggest fish in the river, a veritable whale in terms of the murderer analogy, and so it was hardly surprising that, instead of being reeled in, Lecter had pulled Will into the river and dragged him to the bottom of somewhere unfathomable instead. The only choices he'd had were to drown or to let himself be eaten by the whale, to survive in the hollow space of his insides, like Jonah.

He shook himself. Fish analogies were not helpful now; they were a distraction. Will had to pause and make himself acknowledge that his dream had contained a significant amount of reaching for Hannibal in a sexual manner. Given that he had no previous interests in that direction, for his doctor or for any other men, Will had to assume that he was empathising with Hannibal's subconscious desires.

Everything Dr Lecter had done so far had been in an effort to make Will his companion, for whom there would be no secrets. No *want* for secrets, even. The game had begun almost the moment they met. He'd been tested, pushed, manipulated and deceived, and he'd come out on the other side with blood on his hands. Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper, and to someone like that, that meant only one thing.

Love. This was love to him. Narcissistic, brutal, unequivocal; the only way such a killer could love.

"You are alone because you are unique." Hannibal had said.

"I'm as alone as you are," he had replied.

When he had been tracking the Minnesota Shrike, living inside that man's mind, he had seen him so clearly he had felt like they were doing the same things at the same time, at a distance. He'd once described it as talking to his shadow, suspended on dust.

With Hannibal, it was so much worse than that, so much more absorbing.

Slowly, painfully, he came to realise that his dream was telling him that the small level of separation that he'd always maintained with the other killers whose crimes he'd reconstructed and added to his mental landscape was gone. But not out of force. He'd wanted them to be gone. He wanted to feel that sense of stability, the powerful oneness of being joined with someone who embodied those qualities for him.

It didn't matter if the sudden sexual want he was feeling for Hannibal Lecter had originated with the other man. There were no barriers anymore. He couldn't separate himself away like before. His thoughts, his emotions, his feelings, were moving in tandem with Hannibal's now, just as they once had with Garrett Jacob Hobbs, but with twice as much terrible sway over him.

It was still only five o'clock in the morning but Will didn't want to sleep anymore.

He wanted to hunt. His whole being centered down onto this sudden hunger for blood. And so he dressed himself, without even showering, and grabbed his hunting rifle.

The sweet voice of Abigail Hobbs was suddenly in his mind. *"Do you ever hunt?"* she asked him.

"I fish," he muttered.

"It's the same thing, isn't it?" she said. *"One you stalk, the other you lure."*

Will smiled to himself. "Do you fish or do you hunt, Will?" he asked himself, out loud, hearing Hannibal's voice talking through his mouth.

He was going crazy but he couldn't stop it now. There was no way back.

The door of his house swung back and forth in the wind, left open as he wandered out into the night, weapon in hand.

Chapter 6

He knew, when he left the carefully wrapped parcel of meat in Dr Lecter's mailbox, that he would be receiving an invitation to dine with him. What he hadn't anticipated was the additional presence of Alana Bloom and the tiresome Frederick Chilton at the dinner table.

It was baffling to him why they should be there at all and he found it difficult to bear the intrusion in what he had expected to be a private moment between himself and the object of his growing obsession. Will had to draw on Hannibal's strength periodically as Dr Chilton prodded at his mind, like an irritating child pulling on the tail of a puppy, in order to stay calm and collected at the numerous provocations on offer.

Will contemplated asking him if he was still restricted to the use of a colostomy bag for his bodily functions but held his tongue. It was too rude to contemplate, no matter how satisfying it would be.

He noticed Alana staring at him on occasion as he responded to questions dispassionately, with a detached voice that didn't seem to belong to him. The veteran psychiatrist could tell that he wasn't entirely himself, her silent attempts at diagnosis just as loud and grating as Dr Chilton's conversation.

Hannibal was pleasant and charming to his guests, as he always was. He had an easy grace that Will knew he could emulate if he wanted to, but which he consciously chose not to. It was a show the man performed to hide his true nature to the world, nothing more than that. He served the meat Will procured for him in artistically drawn slices, dressed with notes of red wine sauce and complimented with vegetables.

"What are we dining on?" Dr Chilton asked, placing his napkin on his lap with a relish.

"Venison," Hannibal said and gave Will a pointed look.

Will watched Hannibal closely as he began eating, so much so that he forgot to start himself until prompted by Alana.

"It's really good," she said, nudging him surreptitiously under the table.

"Thank you Alana," Hannibal said, brightly, "although I warn that it is a relatively simple dish. I hope it will satisfy even your refined palette."

Alana quirked her eyebrow at him. "False modesty, Hannibal?"

"I recently read a theory in the New York Journal of Psychology that false modesty is actually the hallmark of a true narcissist," Chilton interjected, smiling lopsidedly. "Not accusing our good host of such a deadly sin, I trust?"

That drew a chuckle from Lecter; one that was completely displaced and false, Will knew. "That would only be the case were I extracting a measure of praise from the assertion."

"And thus we have a paradox," Alana said, continuing the jovial tone of the conversation. "I want to compliment you on the meal, but now I'm afraid that doing so might intimate suspicion of a personality disorder."

Chilton was grinning from ear to ear now, garishly. "I have no such qualms," he said, and held up his wine glass. "In fact, I'd like to toast the good mental health of Dr Lecter. Long may these delicious dishes continue."

Alana held up her glass, obligingly.

"Ah but I have not heard from one of my guests as to whether this meal is satisfactory or not," Hannibal said, and again looked to Will.

Will looked up at him from behind his glasses, feeling another surge of annoyance at the attention of the others at the table. "You know it is," he said, with none of the amusement of the others. He held up his glass, keeping his eyes fixed onto Hannibal, communicating that he wasn't happy.

The toast was made but that was practically the last time he looked up or engaged. Will just wanted to get it over with now. He wanted to go back to his empty home.

Distantly, as a dessert of dark chocolate moose and red berries was served, Will came to a realisation. He was being punished. The entire meal was a powerplay on Dr Lecter;s part, and despite being his star pupil, he had made an error on his test.

Will had hunted of his own accord, just as he knew Hannibal was hoping he would. He had let the hands of Garrett Jacob Hobbs guide him on the hunt, and he had shot down a deer in the forest down the road from his house in Wolf Trap. Will had dragged it home, gutted it and taken a few choice cuts for Hannibal.

But it wasn't what Hannibal wanted to dine on. Worse, it had been a sign to him that Will's mind still held the faint dead leaf echo of another killer inside it. He hadn't used Hannibal's hands to bring this meal to his table, he'd fallen back onto the imprint he held of Hobbs, and Dr Lecter was nothing if not a jealous god. The adultery was the reason Will was being denied what he really needed; to be alone with Hannibal and to explore their connection; to feel whole and sane.

Although it wasn't the sort of thing he had ever done before, never having been one for petty manipulations until he'd lost his mind, Will made a deliberate effort to get some of the chocolate of his dessert smudged onto the side of his lower lip. He didn't add enough to cause alarm in the other guests, but he used enough for Hannibal to notice. It was a dirty trick, but one that he knew was working well when he noticed the way Hannibal kept looking back to him, staring at his mouth, with a note of frustration and disapproval. His private revenge was had.

Then the meal was over and the wine was drained. Will waited for Alana and Chilton to put on their coats before excusing himself for the bathroom, making hasty goodbyes to them both and narrowly avoiding an aside exchange with Dr Bloom, her eyes sparkling with the need to ask him if he was okay. He didn't want to lie to her. There was no way out but to retreat.

He listened and waited for the close of the front door before venturing back into the dining room.

The plates were cleared and stacked in the sink, but the house sounded eerily silent and still. Will listened and listened, and checked the adjoining rooms, and yet discovered nothing. Only when he turned to return did he see the blur, Hannibal appearing out of nowhere and pushing him hard against the wall, gripping him by the arms, face close.

Will stood his ground as much as he could. He didn't look away as Hannibal moved his head closer, remembering his reaction before in the basement when Will had flinched at his touch. This time, he needed to make it clear that he was not going to pull away. The memory of his dream, where he'd pinned Hannibal down and joined their bodies in a writhing mass of two, was at the front of his mind. So he kept his gaze locked onto his eyes and only let his own slide closed as he shivered, involuntarily, with the connection of Hannibal's tongue on the corner of his lips as he lapped away the smudge of chocolate.

The way Will leaned into him in response seemed to surprise Hannibal a little. This caused him to still and hold his breath, his whole body going rigid.

When Will looked, he saw Hannibal frowning, staring at the floor between them.

"No more games, Dr Lecter. This is what you wanted from me, right?" Emboldened by a confidence stolen from the killer in his mind, Will leaned in further and slid a hand onto his thigh. "Right?"

Hannibal swallowed hard. "No," he said, and pulled away from him entirely.

The warmth of his body was lost from Will's touch and he felt bereft. The world around him thumped across his vision and he stumbled a little, suddenly unstable.

"Will, you should go home."

A surge of madness was threatening to tilt him over. The next thing he knew, Lecter was on the floor and he was fighting to keep him pinned down. He felt betrayed by his own mind as it turned against them both. He was not sure what he was doing, he only knew that he had to do it. "You don't get to send me away, *Hannibal*," he said, diminishing him with the use of his first name. "I lied for you. I *killed* for you. All I can hear in my mind is your voice, your thoughts, your needs." He was grinding against him, hips snapping hard enough to bruise. "Your *needs*."

Lecter threw him off and leapt onto him with a strange gymnastic grace, holding him down, the barest hint of a snarl transforming his face into something feral. "I could tear you to pieces," he growled, digging his nails into Will's wrists. "I could dine on you for months; consume every part of you."

Something clicked into place for Will. "You don't think I understand what you are, do you?"

"If you did, you wouldn't be here, offering yourself up to me."

Will hooked his legs around him and arched his spine a little. "I know you're a monster," he said, and felt something crumbling in the man above him. "I know," he added, at a whisper. "You've made me one too. There's nothing... nothing else but you for me"

After a moment, the fingers which were pinning him down slid away and moved underneath his back. He was lifted up against Hannibal's body, seated in his lap with his chin on his shoulder and his legs still hooked around him. The tension was now leaving them both and all that remained was a gentle note of care. He sighed and let the feeling of peace and calm wash over him.

"No more fish and no more venison, Will," Hannibal said, now stroking a hand up and down his back, cradling him tightly with such affection it took Will's breath away. "Let go. Become me. You know what I hunt."

Will let his cheek rest against the sharp blade of Hannibal's shoulder and stared off into the darkness, knowing exactly what was being asked of him.

They remained there for what felt like some time, Hannibal lightly rocking the body that clung to him, stroking his hair and back, allowing the occasional brush of his lips against Will's ear. Will felt hollowed out, like he had no organs in the cavity of his torso; only kept alive by their connection, only kept from collapsing in on himself by the strong arms supporting him.

The house was cold and everything silent when, finally, he was coaxed to his feet and walked out to his car. Nothing more was said by either of them that night.

Chapter 7

Three weeks passed by in a cloud of nightmares and elaborate daytime imaginings involving what Hannibal might be doing at any given moment. He ate his meals with slow grace and an appreciation that had never even occurred to him to enjoy before. He took care to iron his shirts and took to wearing his smarter clothes on a day to day basis. Will even found himself slicking his hair back from his forehead sometimes and mimicking Hannibal's penetrating gaze in the mirror.

He felt cocooned. Something was growing under his skin, getting ready to burst out of him; wings the colour of blood and bone. Wolf Trap was a transitory space that felt more and more meaningless to him now. His workstation of lures had been packed away and all the spare pieces of boat engines he'd been working on in the garage were piled in a corner out of sight.

Will decided to go about the process of rehoming his seven dogs in the order they came to him in. This was not so much because he sensed that Hannibal would not want them around long term; in fact, Hannibal was quite fond of them. It was simply the last unselfish act Will felt he was now capable of. He was not able to care for them the way he once had. Oh, he still filled their bowls with food and water, and let them out periodically, but the understanding and the want to keep them close was simply not there anymore.

It really came down to the sense that he didn't belong at the head of a family of stray dogs. That had always been in lieu of the human connections that he could never seem to grasp. Things were different now. Will had a place in the world, and a purpose. He was connected, profoundly, to someone vital and real. So much so he didn't know where he ended and Dr Lecter began.

"You are alone because you are unique," Hannibal's voice reminded him often.

"I'm as alone as you are," he whispered to himself and smiled, every time.

Two lost and lonely wanderers, on a path unseen by the majority of the world, united in their ability to see art in the things that most people feared. That was how he saw it. The horror he had always felt before at the sight of all those sad dead photographed faces of murder victims had been replaced with a note of detached appreciation. Where once he suffocated from the constant assault on his senses, of fear and sadness, guilt and anger, he now felt serene and calm.

There was no way back now.

Alana Bloom visited him after he had paid a visit to the family who had taken in Winston, the final placement made. Will made a point of checking on all of the dogs daily, using his savings to make donations to the shelters who took the dogs in so he could see them through the rehoming process personally as a caveat. She was concerned by his apparent decision to fold into his isolation.

"You're not acting like yourself," she told him as they took a gentle walk around the perimeter of the plain north of his house.

"My uh, self, has always been rather fluid," he said and shrugged, "price of what I do. Used to do."

That placated her a little. "Are you planning to go back?"

Will considered the question thoroughly, letting Hannibal speak through him to make the conversation easier to get through. "I'll still teach. As for the rest, I doubt whoever they get to replace Jack will want me. Not when I shot their predecessor." He coughed, politely. "Alana, I can assure you, I am doing a lot better."

"Okay. But your dogs... would it be prying to ask why you've given them up?"

"Yes," he said, and smiled at her, borrowing Hannibal's charm to disarm her. "The truth is, I think I've done a lot of growing of late. I don't need them around me anymore, and I believe they deserve families who will give them more attention." He flashed his teeth at her again when he noticed she was frowning at the ground as they walked along. "Alana, I promise, there's nothing to worry about. Can't you tell I'm much better now? Better than ever."

"Sure," she responded, but didn't sound nearly convinced. "It's just..."

"What?"

"Will, the whole time I've known you, you've never been this way. I'm mean, you're radiating something. Confidence maybe? You're definitely more stable than I've ever seen you. I'm just trying to understand. What's changed?"

Will found himself imagining her breasts pulled upright, her arms tied upwards, her neck slashed and the blood running down her porcelain skin and carving curved rivers around the shapely orbs, down to her flat stomach. She would be breathtaking as a corpse. However, she was not a suitable sacrifice; her life was not worthless, her manners sharp, her intelligence worthy of preservation. Will knew he was seeing her through Hannibal's eyes, with all his aesthetic appreciation for transformative beauty. Alana Bloom would probably never be fitting for their dinner table but that didn't mean they couldn't contemplate and enjoy the scenario.

Besides, he already had someone else in mind for Hannibal's dinner table.

"Dr Lecter has been helping me," he told her, lightly. "In a strange way, he reminds me that Jack Crawford did have good intentions, at least at the start. Jack brought him in to help me cope with all the crime scenes and dead bodies. I suppose it's comforting he's still around." Once again, Hannibal was talking through him, creating reasonable scenarios for him to expound.

Alana's eyes were dark and sharp as she assessed his explanation. "I remember you once swore you couldn't be helped by having a psychiatrist." Her face held a sly smile that didn't seem particularly authentic.

"Ah but he's not my psychiatrist. Not officially. Never was. We're just... friends."

They walked along in companionable silence for a little while, heading across the halfway point and starting to turn back towards the house.

"This sure beats looking for injured animals that don't exist," he commented, remembering the last time they had walked together in that spot.

The petite woman laughed at that. "Sure does," she agreed, and then shuffled closer to him, a little awkwardly. Something was on her lips, half formed, stuck as she tried to think of the right way to say it.

Will knew exactly what it was. He knew that this stable, stronger version of himself - a man impervious to her pathological need to analyse and dissect and overthink - was what she had wanted from him all along. If he wanted her now, he could finally bridge that gap. Yet he also knew that there was nothing more to discuss on the subject of them being together. Whatever flutter of feeling he had held for her once was completely absent now.

"We should head back," he cut in before she could speak and make things difficult. "I'm hoping to get some fishing later. See if I can catch something for Hannibal to cook."

Alana saw the moment slide and took it gracefully, though a slight knot of thought remained on her brow. "Funny," she muttered.

"What?"

"I've never heard you say Hannibal's first name before."

Will smiled but didn't say anything further. He wondered if she would ever understand and decided that it was unlikely. No one would ever be able to peel back the veil of their construction and understand even a little of what they were to each other.

Alana left soon after they returned to his house. There was little more to say now that she no longer had his dogs as a good excuse for discussion. Once alone, Will continued the preparations he had started that morning before she had made an appearance.

There wasn't a great deal more to be done. Mrs Vera Turner of Kennel Kare Inc, a widow who stank of cigarettes and who had horrid, staring eyes, lived completely alone and out of the way. He had come across her while researching placements for his dogs in the nearby area, given that no one shelter could take them all. This woman was offering a run down and substandard kenneling service that wasn't fit for any living creature. Whatever heart Will had left had broken at the sight of the place and it didn't take long to dig up a conviction for animal cruelty, sadly now spent and therefore defunct.

Tonight, he was shutting her 'business' down for good.

Surprisingly, he felt completely calm as he made the journey out to her place in the dead of night. The decision had been made a week ago and he had let the tableau present itself to him

in his dreams, the Ripper surging into his mind through his connection with Hannibal, guiding his thoughts and showing him how to proceed.

He broke into the converted garages where the unfortunate boarders were kept overnight in stinking cages and let them all out into the gardens. Will put down some feed and refilled their water bowls to ensure the animals would be comfortable for the night before breaking into the main house with a screwdriver and hammer.

Vera was already awake, roused by the commotion. Her mouth was spewing vile words as she crept down her stairs, shotgun in hand.

Will waited patiently for her to come close and to turn her back to him before he moved in, one hand knocking the gun out of her grasp and the other curling around her neck. She couldn't even croak as he dragged her through the darkness and into the grooming area, where a rusty table surrounded by sheers and scissors awaited her skinny body.

His pulse didn't even flicker as he chained her down and paused to visualise his tableau before it was made. The sense of power and righteousness he felt, knowing he would now destroy this creature, this unworthy pig, was intoxicating. Out of the ugliness of a life wasted, he would create beauty and art.

Will didn't pause, didn't flinch, or feel any regret. Abigail Hobbs stood at the head of the metal table, smiling at him, her blue eyes sparkling with pride. He looked down and saw that his hands were not his own anymore. He watched, almost impassively, as the woman was skewered by her implements, one by one, every scream and gurgle like music in his ears.

At the approaching note of death, he slit her down the middle and used sheers to break her ribs. He held the prize he sought in his hands and lifted it free, the pounding thump of lingering life running all the way through him and making him shiver.

He showed Abigail the heart and she nodded at him, grinning. *"It looks good, Dad,"* she said.

"Thank you, Abigail."

He cut it free and watched it still. Freed from the body of the ugly woman it had been trapped inside, it took on a completely new form in his eyes. It would live in a different way from now on; as something that would be part of him, and part of Hannibal too, uniting them forever.

Will washed it down in the sink and wandered back to his car. He had a box of ice ready in the back of his car to seat it in, taking great care to make sure it would be properly preserved for its new purpose.

He stopped by his house to clean himself up and replenish the ice in the box prior to wrapping it in brown paper. Then he drove for an hour into Baltimore to place his offering into Hannibal's mailbox, before heading back home.

It was nearly dawn by the time he went to bed, but it still took time for him to find his way to sleep, giddy as he was with thoughts of what Hannibal would do next.

When he awoke sometime in the afternoon, his dinner invitation was already in his mailbox, placed there by hand and written with a proud flourish.

Chapter 8

A quiet reverie descended on Will as he whiled away the hours of the rest of the day. The walls of his home seemed to shimmer and sway, like they were melting, or weren't really real anymore. And when he drove over to the town a few miles away to find some decent wine to bring to the table that evening, he somehow wasn't surprised to arrive home to a billowing cloud of black smoke and red flames.

His house was on fire and he didn't even feel surprised.

That the fire department hadn't already arrived told him that his alarms hadn't activated as they should have, which in turn told him that it had probably been intentional. It was a message from Hannibal. A graduation gift, almost.

He was never going back there again.

The little house which had looked like a safehaven, a ship on the water when he looked at it from a distance, was sinking into nothing. Another bridge to what once was his normality was burning away. Yet he knew, with absolute certainty, that it was not a warning, as some might take it. It was a gift, welcoming him to the home of another. Even so, he couldn't help but step near to the blaze and feel the seering heat on his skin, near-touching the final remnants of his possessions as they transformed into ashes.

There wasn't a lot left of the place when he finally called the fire department out and watched, dumbly, as half a dozen men fought to quell the blaze. It was nothing more than a steaming shell of matchstick-like angular framing by the time he got in his car and began the drive to Baltimore, with nothing left but the shirt on his back and the bottle of wine on the passenger seat.

He vaguely recalled all the times he'd visited Hannibal before, seeking friendship and help, seeking stability. He'd always been so tense pulling up to his house before, always so lost and halfway broken. Now he was serene and assured; a man who had lost everything, supported by the crutch of another's madness and thus set free from his own. Folie à deux.

It went against all logic as he knew how to define it to feel love for this monster. The man had murdered young Abigail and forced pieces of her down his gullet like a duck destined to become foie gras. He had killed and killed again, spilling his love for Will out through the blood of others because it was the only way he knew how to express it then, when his true face remained hidden. Yet Will loved him still, in the grand way normally reserved for love of the self; free of judgement, full of confidence, untouched by reality.

Hannibal greeted him at the door with a barely contained energy that would have been vulgar in anyone else. Will was greeted and welcomed inside, and once again Hannibal locked the door behind him, top and bottom, making a show of his intention for Will not to leave that night.

Will listened for a moment, not expecting to hear the voices of other guests, but unable to avoid checking. As he knew they would be, this time the dinner party was a feast for two. This night was theirs and theirs alone. He'd earned it.

He held his breath as he realised that Hannibal was leaning into him, apparently smelling him at the neck. "You went too close to the fire, Will."

Will smiled sadly, swaying, but said nothing.

"You will want to shower before the meal. Please, follow me to your room."

Hannibal led him up the stairs and into one of his bedrooms, a room dressed in soft green furnishings with a large ensuite bathroom attached to it. Will couldn't help but grin, in the way that madmen do, when he saw a suit laid out on the bed for him. The smile quickly faded as he noticed the box placed next to it.

He recognised it as the repository of dogeared old photos he had kept in the bottom of his closet in Wolf Trap. It contained pictures of his mother from before he was born, old memories of lazy days with his father, cut up portraits of all the stray dogs he'd known along the way in his youth, everything blurry and faded and warmly comforting.

A pang of something unnameable stung Will to the core. He was about to ask Hannibal how on earth he had even known about that box, hidden under a pile of old clothes as it had been, but his host was already retreating to the hallway.

Idly, he knocked the lid off to check that the most precious of his oldest memories were still there, and was bemused to find a few extra pictures added to the top of the modest pile. They were rescued from Abigail's phone he supposed. There was a mirror shot of her examining her scar with a long swan neck, an awkward selfie she had taken with Will, and a covert shot she had apparently taken of Will and Hannibal together without their knowledge. The background was the greenhouse of the facility she had first stayed in following the death of her parents. They were caught in a frozen moment of mutual contemplation, facing each other, eyes in full contact.Will could see why Hannibal had decided to preserve that one, it held such a note of prediction and promise regarding their future.

It was quite clear that Hannibal was creating a narrative of their life together already, as important and preservable as his faint memories of a mother he'd never known beyond a few still images. It was oddly endearing. Abigail was a daughter gained, shared and lost, and forever a part of their tapestry.

Will showered, enjoying the act of cleansing himself of his old life, and wore the suit that Hannibal had selected for him. It wasn't anywhere near as formal as the sort the man himself wore, but the cut was perfect and the fabric smooth to the touch. There was no tie or jacket, just trousers and silk waistcoat with a dash of colour from a pocket kerchief, and a shirt which could be safely worn unbuttoned at the neck. Will couldn't help but take the time to tame his curls and admire how he looked in the mirror. It wasn't just the clothes that caught his attention, it was his whole demeanor and the new steel in his eyes that privately thrilled him.

The whole house was alive with the scent of cooking, so vivid Will could already taste it on his tongue. He padded down the stairs and obeyed the instructions immediately given to take a seat in the dining room in one of the two chairs set facing each other. Their meal was ready.

Hannibal teased him with a starter dish of seafood and lemon. Another small test of his patience, which Will was only too happy to throw behind him with ease.

Neither spoke of the topics on their minds. Instead of sharing details of Will's first dissection, or arguing over whether Hannibal burning down his home was really necessary to ensure his continued presence at the dinner table. Instead they spoke of the media reports of Jack Crawford's crimes and speculated as to the future of the BSU under new leadership. It was somewhat surreal, but Will didn't really know what else to say at this point.

At last, the main dish was served on a platter between them; the heart, stuffed with herbs and spices, wrapped with sheets of parma ham and garnished with rich green salad leaves.

"Would you care to carve?" Hannibal asked, eyes twinkling with amusement.

Will gave him a short sharp nod and took the carving knife and prongs from his hands.

He hadn't thought ahead to this moment, but in a flash of knowingness, he knew exactly what he wanted to do now. Will carved a few slices and placed them onto Hannibal's plate with care, setting them where he had left white space in his tableau of complimentary vegetables. Then he replaced the serving implements to one side of the heart.

A slight frown marred Hannibal's regal features. "Are you not eating?"

Silently, Will circled around him. He leaned back against the table, half seating himself next to Hannibal's plate in a manner that was quite obscene in the dinner party context. He took up Hannibal's fork, speared some of the food, and placed it into his own mouth, enjoying the curious look on Hannibal's face. Will chewed his gift, the human heart he'd felt beating in his hands, a few times and then leaned into Hannibal with pupils dilated and wide.

This was their first kiss and it felt oddly symbolic. The morsels of food, with the tang of blood and the myriad of expertly chosen flavours excited both of their tongues at once. Human flesh rolled between their teeth, shared, as everything would be from now on.

Hannibal gave out a slightly strangled groan and pulled back. He stared at Will with a soft surprise. While he chewed and swallowed the given over food, Will took a swig of the wine he'd brought to the table, out of Hannibal's glass, and wrapped his arms around Hannibal's shoulders to transfer it between their mouths, tongues sliding with the red nectar, sensual and filled with promise.

With all the sudden snap of an elastic band stretched to its end, Will found himself gripped tightly in his host's hands. Hannibal turned to the side in his seat and pulled him forward so that he had no choice but to spread his legs on either side of the man's thighs and slide into a seated position on them. Hannibal gripped onto his lapels and pulled him down for a kiss without the obstruction of food or drink, his chest heaving, a hard heat straining against Will's perineum.

"Ah ah ah," Will taunted, pulling back, "it's terribly rude not to finish your dinner before sampling dessert."

Curses flew past Hannibal's eyes, even though he expertly prevented his expression from registering his frustration. He retrieved the fork and skewered another mouthful, feeding it to Will like a man discovering art and beauty for the first time. Will accepted it, chewing deliberately and without taking his eyes off him. Every time he swallowed another mouthful, he tilted his hips into Hannibal just a little, lending a small bit of friction, deliberately slight yet enough to make the heat he felt against his backside seem to grow hotter still each time.

As the final pieces of heart from the plate were folded into a parcel on the fork, Will tilted his head so that his breath was against Hannibal's ear. "It seems I've been terribly rude and eaten your portion of this dinner. You must be hungry, Dr Lecter. A palette cleanser?"

A dark lust made Hannibal shiver. "Will," he sighed, fighting to hold himself back, "what are you doing?"

"Everything. Anything." He lapped at the shell of his host's ear. "I reflect everything you are, the light and the dark, the dust that flies between, illuminated into life by shards of light. Your desires give life to my desires." He peppered Hannibal's jaw with delicate brushes of his lips. "You're under my skin, breathing through me. The tones and timbres of your voice live in my mind, in place of my own voice. I want this because you want this." He kissed him, deeply, reaching almost right into his throat with his tongue.

They had always spoke a language of their own, words formed out of metaphors and art and delusions. It was the lure that first snagged Hannibal; that moment he'd spoken of mental associations and bone forts and tasteless thoughts, and Will had understood him completely and responded in the same language. They had each spent a lifetime speaking in tongues that no one had been capable of deciphering until that moment of revelation. And although Will hadn't appreciated the significance of it at the time, he knew he could trace the fatalistic trajectory of his inevitable downfall all the way back to that original meeting. It had frightened him so much at the time, to connect to another, he'd raised every defence he had against the invasion and rudely stormed out of the room. On some level, he'd known this was how he'd finally lose himself completely.

How easy it was now he had surrendered, he thought. How hard it was to remember why he'd struggled so much, as he was lifted and spread onto the table, all trappings of the meal swept aside with a tremendous clatter. Will sighed in his chest as Hannibal methodically unfastened every button he could find, and then leaned over his straining crotch, breathing heavily.

Will knew what the moment of hesitation was. Hannibal hadn't known himself before, not really. Only in Will's incarnation of his true self could he see his own needs and desires clearly for the first time. Yet he was still afraid, in his own way, of giving in. It wasn't in his nature to surrender, especially to himself. His control was his pride.

So Will encouraged him by running his fingers through the ashen blonde hair and by swaying his hips. It worked to break the spell and soon Hannibal was carefully drawing Will's hardness free of his clothes and rolling it in his fingers. Will gasped at the rush of air and the anticipation.

"Can a man know nourishment in the mere sight of another? Can his hunger be sated with the beauty of his second soul? Perhaps," Hannibal breathed, to himself more than to Will. He rested his lips on Will's stomach, kissing downwards along the sensitive skin just below his belly button.

Through the haze of desire, the throb, Will couldn't help but let out a throaty groan. "You've never tasted before?"

A sly smile curved Hannibal's lips. "I appreciate the human form and all its fascinating nerve endings. I have consumed, in a number of ways. But never..." he swallowed, a hint of reticence betrayed, "this."

He was talking of their connection, Will knew. He wanted to say something too, that he was breaching new territory entirely in letting Hannibal consume him so completely. However there was no time to speak before his hardness was folded into the wet heat of an eager mouth.

Will arched his hips and groaned prettily at the ministrations given, the urge to shy away fading, allowing himself as he did to embrace the decadence of what was happening. The hands which slid up his thighs and clung to the flesh above his hips as he was swallowed repeatedly seemed like claws to him. They stung him and everything felt strange and hideous, yet stark and glorious too. He felt like a living dish, a holy communion corrupted by the mouth of a devil. Hannibal possessed him completely and took everything he had to give. He came with a shrill cry and a shudder that reverberated through them both.

When his vision returned, he instinctively grabbed Hannibal's tie, using it to draw him closer for a hard kiss which shared his essence the way they had shared the meal and the wine. The flush which had spread across Hannibal's cheeks did not escape his notice and it made him feel proud that he had the power to affect him so thoroughly too.

"Still hungry?" he ask as he leaned his head back, exposing his neck and offering it to the other man.

The response was an growl and an eager tug of his shirt, dragged downwards at the shoulders, Hannibal demanding more flesh against him.

Will stilled his hands. "Not here," he said, breathlessly. He directed Hannibal to look him right in the eyes, the way he never could have managed when he was still just Will Graham. "I want to go to the basement," he confessed. "I want you to take me amongst the dark shapes of the horror you live to create. Make me one of them. Transform me."

The idea caused a great deal of uncertainty in Hannibal's eyes. It was his inner sanctum, the home of the Ripper. "I won't kill you," he said, firmly. "Not even if you ask it."

It was the nearest thing he would ever get to a love confession, Will knew. Truly he had no fear of that outcome; it would be like committing an act of suicide for Hannibal to kill his meticulously created mirror image. No, he sought another kind of death; the kind which would lead to a rebirth and a new world. "Taint me. Mark me as yours. Take me to the hell you live in. Hold nothing back."

Hannibal observed him for a long moment, fingers pinching against his arms, chest heaving with heavy breaths.

"This is what you *need* from me," Will said, cupping his cheek with the palm of his hand. A little tenderness before the gathering storm.

Something was burning inside Hannibal now. Will could sense it rising, trying to push past the stone walls that formed his outer shell. He felt a note of triumph because he knew that this was his purpose now; to take their combined self and elevate it. This was what it had all come down to.

A flash of movement and he was unexpectedly thrown over Hannibal's shoulder, kicking and fighting to be let down to walk as he was carried away into the dark hallway, towards the first locked door of Hannibal's private domain.

Chapter 9

Will stared at the slate ceiling of Hannibal's bedroom for some time, cataloging the many aches and pains assaulting his prone form.

Something had overcome him once he'd gotten down into the basement. He'd broken free of Hannibal's grip and become something else, someone else, the soul of the Ripper bursting through. He'd fought and he'd kicked and punched and made it a battle of wills. He'd known that that was what Hannibal needed. He needed Will fighting, struggling, knocked half unconscious and spread for him like a tribute.

Hannibal wouldn't be able to break free of his self imposed bonds of control without that permission given to be his truest, most sadistic, most destructive form. It was the final confirmation he needed; to know that Will really was his. And Will wanted Hannibal to be raw and punched open just as much as he was. So he struggled and lashed out, forcing a fight for dominance, tearing down all boundaries between them.

Almost every part of him now hurt in some way. His side was bruised from being slammed against that metal table where so much blood had run. His arms were sore from wrestling the larger man off him until he couldn't do it any more. His insides contained a dull ache from the pounding heat of their animalistic coupling on that cold metal surface with the light over it, spiking a little every time he moved. His face was a smudged oil painting a yellow and blue circled around his right eye, with red splitting his lip in half and dark pink fingerprints visible in the pressure points of his neck. His hair was a straggly thicket of clumped locks.

Will was a mess but he felt incredibly good. Freed. The marks felt like a badge of honour as he turned his head to watch Hannibal sleeping, every line and wrinkle in the man's face smoothed away. He hadn't expected to have enjoyed the act of being breached like that. Distantly, he wondered if perhaps some of the struggle had been that last wedge between his reflection of Hannibal's desires and his own fear of the physicality of submitting. Maybe some of it was even down to needing that final confirmation that, however far Hannibal went, he wouldn't kill him as he had so many others. For all that Hannibal could be cruel and manipulative and the very devil himself, there was no question of that now. Will had proven himself worthy.

And more importantly, he knew he would not kill Hannibal either.

Abigail kept Will company most of the night, her pretty blue eyes flashing in the darkness. He imagined her smiling at the thought of he and Hannibal being joined together; her fathers, united, and her life, forever treasured by them. Will told her he wished she hadn't unearthed Nicholas Boyle from the ground and set the chain of events in motion that led her into a dark alleyway with nothing but death and Hannibal at either ends. Abigail agreed with him but said that what was done was done. She was still with them in death, and she would keep the angrier spirits - Jack and Bella and Georgia and Dr Sutcliffe and Cassie and Marissa and so many more - away.

He slept in short bursts through the night, waking each time with the copper taste of blood on his tongue and Hannibal's heavy arm thrown over him, holding him close. He thought of how Hannibal tasted, rich and intense, and of how those lips had ravaged him through the act of their coupling and soothed him afterwards with a penitent ease. He recalled Hannibal's groaning whispers, half heard notions of passion and foreverness falling out. Will let the tiredness hit him in waves and spent the rest of the time with the ghosts in his head and the darkness he'd embraced to his heart.

Come dawn, he was ready. The teasing memories of how it had been to capture the stag in his dreams were at the front of his mind now that he had established the bridge. Will pushed the sheets covering them away and rolled onto Hannibal's body, nipping the nape of his neck and rolling his hips against the partition of his buttocks. He ran his hands along the arch of Hannibal's back and up to his shoulders, the corresponding groan he received sending sparks through his brain.

In the dawn light, the dark red coloured satin sheets on which they lay looked like blood to him. Abigail's blood. Arterial. It was everywhere and so fitting beneath them.

Though he still hurt all over, the adrenalin and overwhelming crush of want was acting like a temporary miracle cure. He was ready to express his liberation. But Hannibal was awake now and growing more stiff with uncertainty beneath his touch every passing moment.

It was a remarkable facet, Will now knew, that Hannibal was so certain and unflinching in every aspect of his life and yet found it difficult to take the initiative on intimacy. It was too new to him to have another person, even someone who had become him mentally, under his skin like this. Hannibal was coiled, ready to bolt or fight. So at the vaguest hint of movement, Will pushed him down at the back of his neck, hard enough almost to bruise, making it very clear that he was not going anywhere.

It wasn't that the tables had turned. They'd broken down every possible barrier to their mutual darkness, devouring their first victim together, before devouring each other. Now it was important to Will to explore the other side, here, now, in the cherished first hours of his residency inside Hannibal's walls. He needed to touch the light as well as the dark there.

Will lightly padded to the ensuite bathroom to retrieve a bottle of orange blossom oil from the cupboard, his battered reflection in the mirror on front of it still a source of amusement to him. He was pleased to discover that Hannibal hadn't moved an inch when he returned, though he detected that the effort of acquiescing was making the man shiver.

"Shh," he cooed as he climbed back onto the bed and rolled himself back into place against the back of his thighs, pouring some of the sweet smelling oil into his hands. "You're mine to take care of," Will said, and began to massage along his back, forcing that unwelcome note of stiffness out. "One day, I'll make this blood. We'll slice necks together and bathe in the spray."

Hannibal groaned again, this time with breathless want. "Will," he murmured into his pillow and started to relax.

"We'll make a mountain of death. Deserving death. All those pigs. We'll make the world beautiful, together. The feast will be ours by right."

Hums of approval at both his words and his ministrations gratified Will deeply. He knew that he had never known obsession, or even love, until this man had taken hold of the wreck he had been and forced him into this new reality where all the dark images that were burned into his mind could live artfully and be expressed free of guilt. Speaking in their shared private language of nightmarish imagery made the room fall away around them in Will's eyes, leaving the two of them as gods of their own world.

He let his hands stray downwards to the swell of Hannibal's behind, parting them and glancing his fingers across the entry point he sought. Will dripped more oil over him and continued the massage down into his most intimate places, pulling him apart so far Hannibal's breaths were growing shallow and harsh. He breached the man lightly with his fingers in quick darts at first, teasing, before making a real effort to open his body up.

Prize his body open, Will thought, *as he prized my mind open.* It was a darkly delicious thought.

He finally eased himself in, replacing his fingers smoothly, with considerable care; a lot more care than had been shown to him before. The excitement was dulling his aches, though the odd pang here and there continued to hit his brain and make him hiss.

"I want you to feel this," he said, and began to thrust into the impossibly hot heat. "All the way to core, feel this. Like I did. I need you to let go now." Will continued to massage his hands over Hannibal's back as he moved.

"Nngh," Hannibal groaned, fisting the sheets in his hands.

"Yes, that's it. Shhh."

The sound of skin sliding and the orange tang scent of the oil grew like a balloon at the edges of their private universe. Will breathed in long pants and slowly grew to awareness of how naturally their breaths became a unison chorus. Unlike associations, atunement did not come naturally to either of them, and there was a sense of miracle in the discovery of it.

"Will... stop..." Hannibal said, with immediacy. "I need to see your face... your eyes."

"So you can see the madness in them?" Will chuckled without breaking the rhythm of his movements for even a second. "Or do you just want to see your own reflection?"

Although the man beneath him sighed, no answer was forthcoming. Will decided to do as requested, privately reveling in the thought of reenacting the way it had been in his dream; sliding between Hannibal's strong thighs and burying himself so far and so deep he would drown and never return. Without a thought to the mess of oil all over the sheets, he pulled out and flipped Hannibal onto his back. Before anything more could be said, he spread his long legs and pressed down over him hard, leaving no escape route. In an instant, he was inside Hannibal again, smothering the faint cry he elicited in a fervent kiss.

No words were needed now. They were in that whirlwind of black feathers together, sinking. Will had no desire to hold back. He allowed his fingers to brush across the sensitive skin of Hannibal's neck, like snakes ready to strike at any moment. It made Hannibal groan and let

his head fall back, exposing himself to crueler methods of finding unity, just as Will had in the basement. But Will didn't act on it; he couldn't concentrate much beyond the incredible sensation already present, of touching him deeply inside, as far as he wanted to go.

Their eyes met, reflections formed in each. All the darkness and the edges of light surrounded their faces there like oceans intent on drowning them.

Then the oily friction between their hard pelvises and soft bellies took on a greater urgency and gave Hannibal release almost all too quickly, his moans throaty and more abandoned than Will had ever heard from him. The internal contractions of his coming in turn sent Will into that spiral fall leading to a heavy landing far far inside Hannibal's skin.

"*Je t'aime à la folie*," Hannibal gasped and rolled Will over, no longer containing his innate strength on command, taken by the moment to press his partner down and hungrily devour his mouth. Will sobbed with the pain of the movement and the exhilaration of the moment. Everything was hot and slick, the bedsheet ruined, their bodies wrecked.

Then Hannibal settled himself over him, sweat-spiked hair tickling under his chin, his toned body almost heavy enough to smother him. Will whimpered a little at how tightly Hannibal's hands clung onto his sides; how forcibly he curled his sharp edges against him. But it wasn't for the pain, it was for the force at which he welcomed that pain and the sheer madness of it all.

While he knew he could not sleep now, he listened to Hannibal's breaths even out and felt his hold slacken, just a little. He allowed his imagination to participate in his dreams. His saw his own skin blacken, his head sprouting long sharp antlers. He thought of all the terrible things to come, all the blood to be spilled, the very chaos of their mutual being, and he smiled.

Meanwhile, Hannibal slept with quiet grace against him, all sense of singular self erased, his world a far richer thing for it.

Epilogue

It was almost unfair, Will thought, to play such a cruel game on this one. Almost.

Alana Bloom was not destined to be a victim for their table but Hannibal did always take his delight in the consumption of minds, as well as of bodies. She had been the catalyst for Will meeting Hannibal, and for that reason alone, they would always grant her her life. What form that took, however, was an eternally fluid contemplation.

This particular game had been Will's desire too, no matter how much he found it regretful in the performing of it. He'd been curious about her reactions too.

What would Alana Bloom do when faced with their brand new reality? Will Graham, moving with grace and speaking in the charming and philosophical ways normally expected only of their host. Will Graham, bruised in one eye and in blotches on his neck along the join of his collar, yet smiling at her darkly. Will Graham, living in Baltimore with Hannibal Lecter and making no secret of why.

She drank down her specially brewed beer, the new batch with a little extra something Hannibal saved from the corpse of Jack Crawford, glancing uncomfortably between them as they made easy conversation about the origins of their meal that she would never grasp the nuance of. When the beer helped her reach sufficient brazenness to ask what was going on, why Will was behaving so strangely, they merely looked at the reflection of one another in their eyes, amidst the candlelight, and smiled.

Alana considered Will's apparent newfound attachment to Hannibal an unhealthy transference brought about by the trauma of Jack's death and the loss of his home. She considered it very strange that he was living in Hannibal's house now of all places, the intimation that she would have expected him to approach her for a place to stay first unspoken yet present in the air. Will could tell she longed to query his very obviously inflicted set of bruises as well but didn't quite know how.

Will placed his hand on top of Hannibal's at the moment most likely to cause a realisation in her mind, and then cleared the plates to the kitchen to allow Alana to confront Hannibal alone. It was part of the game, to watch her flail and flounder at the prospect of her mentor in the field of psychiatry sleeping with the man she called damaged. It was Will's private revenge in a way.

She was livid, as they knew she would be. Hannibal relished the prospect of talking his way around her perceived abuse of his position, his snake tongue a truly beautiful tool, but one which needed to be sharpened periodically.

Will gave her a chance to confront him privately as he showed her out at the end of the meal and endeavoured to give her no answers whatsoever to anything spoken or unspoken between them.

The moment Hannibal kissed his cheek as the front door swung closed, giving her the barest fleeting glimpse of the moment on her retinas, was the greatest finality and full circle Will could have envisaged.

They worshipped at the font of one another's bodies, on the table place where Alana had unwittingly eaten their latest kill, long into the night and beyond.

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